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Reel  
152

Box  
54

Folder  
355

Our way as Americans and Jews, 1929.



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"OUR WAY AS AMERICANS AND JEWS."

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,

DECEMBER 29, 1929, CLEVELAND.

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I should like to address myself this morning particularly to the young people of our congregation, for to them I believe the Festival of Chanukah has a particular appeal. The very surface meaning of this festival arouses in young hearts an eager response. For this festival commemorates the struggle of a small people on behalf of its freedom and independence. A little people, for centuries dominated by foreign rulers, finally decides to become master in its own house, enters a desperate conflict which rages for more than three years against the powerful Graeco-Syrian empire, and after many bloody encounters in the face of great odds wins through to victory.

Chanukah is the Jewish Fourth of July, as it were,--our Independence Day Festival, and as far as the world's history is concerned, it is much more significant than our American Fourth of July; for if Israel at that time had yielded to oppression and consented to surrender its faith and its culture, or if Israel had been defeated at that time, Judaism would have disappeared, Judaism and the Jew would today be only a faint memory, and Christianity would never have been born.

So that in this festival of Chanukah there are all the elements of a great drama of universal



implications, which arouses the admiration of youth. You see, our life during the last twenty centuries, since the dispersion, has been so dependent, in many ways so helpless, that we ourselves are prone to forget that once upon a time our people was a valorous, courageous defender, at the point of death, of its freedom and its independence. We are prone to forget that we were not always the shuttlecock of destiny, passive and helpless in the hands of tyrants or persecuting mobs or persecuting churches.

There is an epic quality to Jewish history. Jewish history is replete with heroes, with leaders who fought valiantly and courageously and victoriously for their people's preservation,--from Moses to Joshua, through David, through Judas the Maccabeus, through Bar Kochba. No history records our many revolutions against foreign tyranny and oppression than does the history of Israel, from the first revolution when our people destroyed the yoke of Egyptian slavery, unto the last revolution when Bar Kochba and his valorous followers dared to challenge the whole Empire of Rome,--the last revolution, which was finally crushed in blood and horror by the overwhelming hordes of the iron legions of Rome. And the Festival of Chanukah is the happiest manifestation of this spirit of unsubdued courage which belonged to our people in those days and throughout history.



The will to live was always strong among our people, and that is one of the reasons why we survive to this day. We wanted to live, and to live our own lives. We did not wish to exchange our life, our mode of living, for any other mode of living; and when the sword was struck from our hand, when Israel was exiled and dispersed some nineteen hundred years ago, and scattered to the four winds, the will to live persisted, and Israel waged war against all forces which tended to disintegrate it or to destroy it,--no longer by physical armies, because these were denied to Israel, except in certain isolated instances, as in the Arabian peninsula, when warlike Jewish tribes fought against Mohammedan hordes, but, by and large, they waged their war since the Destruction to this day with spiritual arms,--by resolution and stubbornness and sacrificial loyalty. And wherever our people found themselves they built for themselves citadels and fortresses,--not of stone, not of masonry, because these were denied them, but they built for the soul of their people fortresses even more mighty and irreducible,--synagogues and schools and Jewish homes, where the life of the people continued strong and vigorous and unabated.

The will to live, the hunger for life,--that was always strong among our people, and when in the nineteenth century European peoples who were denied



political independence began to clamor for their freedom, when self-determination became a battle cry among nations, Israel too set about to reconstruct its national life; Israel too began to ask for the privilege of rehabilitating its national life in its ancient homeland; and the movement towards Palestine in the last two generations is but another manifestation of this irrepressible life hunger of our people.

The Chalutzim today in Palestine,--the young men and women today who are draining the marshes and reafforestating the denuded country and building colonies,--the Chalutzim today are the legitimate heirs of the Maccabees of old, for the same spirit animates them: the spirit to preserve intact Israel. And so I like to talk about Chanukah to young people, because there is a world of poetry and heroism and romance in this festival. We derive pride, a heightened sense of self-esteem from Chanukah.

There is another reason why I like to speak of the message of Chanukah to younger people, because it illustrates one of the latest and one of the newest problems of Jewish life, a problem in which they are vitally interested: the problem of adjustment to other peoples and to other culture. While it is true that during the period of the Maccabees the Jews were still on their own soil in Palestine, it is also true that they were



a politically independent people no longer. They had been absorbed in the great Greek Empire which Alexander the Great had built, and at the time of the Maccabees Israel had for almost two hundred years been under the political control of a part of this great Greek Empire, and had been under the influence of what we call Hellenic culture. This Hellenic culture reached throughout the ancient world from the eastern Mediterranean clear to the coast of India. The Jews were religiously and morally superior to the Greeks; culturally they were inferior. The civilization of Greece was the most brilliant civilization known to antiquity. The Jews could not match the philosophers, the artists, the dramatists, the poets of Greece. Athens was glamorous and tantalizing in the sophistication of its highly developed civilization; and Athens was the model of the entire ancient world at that time.

Judea was inhabited by a hardy, rugged, simple, plain-living, God-fearing people,--a people which possessed little of the refinement and the graces of Hellenic civilization. They were not a barbarian folk by any means; they were a people that had their schools and their synagogues and their temples and their literature, and behind that was a thousand years of glorious history. They had the traditions of patriarchs and prophets and sages and scribes; they had a religion which excelled the



religion of the Greeks. They had a moral code, the finest yet developed by the human mind. And these two cultures--Jerusalem and Athens--met, and a conflict ensued: which will triumph? which will succumb? And the great problem presented to the Jews at that time, even as it is presented to us of this day, was: how shall we adjust ourselves to this new culture and civilization? - the old problem, the new problem; and the answers which were given were old and new.

Three answers were given, three solutions were offered. One, assimilation; the other, isolation; the third, adjustment. One party said, "Why, the whole world has turned Greek. The Greeks are a marvelous people. Behold the exalted civilization which they developed! Look at their philosophy, look at their poetry, look at their drama, look at the flexibility of their language, look at their might in conquering the world! Why should we be stubborn and insist upon remaining Jews? Let us merge with the great Greek world, become part of it." And many wealthy Jews and many aristocratic Jews,--because those Jews are always the first to leave the Jewish fold, and many young people who were fascinated by the surface glitter of Greek civilization, by the theatres and the circuses and the races, by Greek traits and manner and custom,--I say, many of them solved that problem for themselves and



assimilated, and in the course of time ceased to be Jews.

That was the first solution offered.

The second solution was isolation. The Greeks are idol worshippers, idolatrous, heathen; their mode of living is immoral; they are an abomination; they should be avoided; we should have no contact with them. And so people shut themselves in their shells,--stern, orthodox, forbidding, making no compromises, no concessions, living as if around them there did not teem and throb this marvelous new civilization.

And others offered the third solution,--that of harmonious adjustment. They said, "The Greeks have much to teach us. They think more clearly and logically than we do; they appreciate beauty and art more than we do; they have a host of great cultural values. We can learn from them; let us learn from them; let us not take everything they have to offer, because everything they have to offer is not good. Let us eat the meat of the fruit and cast away the rind. Let us be eclectic,--selective, discriminatory.

"On the other hand, we have much to teach them. We have a religion that is as far removed from theirs and as far above theirs as heaven is from earth. They are children in matters of theology and divinity. We have a moral code, a moral idealism, standards of holiness and piety and rectitude which are far superior



to the Greeks. We are a covenanted people, having undertaken to be the teachers of mankind in matters of religion. Let us teach them. Inasmuch as both of us can be teachers, both of us can be learners."

And so they offered the solution of harmonious and critical adjustment, and it was this third solution that was accepted by most of the thoughtful leaders of Israel at that time. Because of that solution Israel was saved, Judaism was saved, Jewish values were preserved. But the breadth and the scope of Greek thought penetrated Jewish thought; and, conversely, the religion of the Jew and the moral/idealism of the Jew penetrated the Hellenic world and transformed it. The Jew yielded only to the point of adopting the good in the other culture. When the other culture threatened to submerge him in a sort of an international Hellenic melting pot, when the other culture threatened to wipe out his religious conviction, he resisted unto death. This is the story of the Maccabees.

Now the same problem of adjustment the Jew faced centuries later when it came in contact with the Arabic world, and the Arabic civilization, and the same three solutions were offered, and the rank and file of Israel chose the third and survived,--ate the meat of the fruit of the foreign culture and cast aside the rind. The same problem of adjustment the Jew faced in Western



Europe, when the walls of the ghetto crumbled and the Jew entered the arena of European life. Again he was faced with the problem of how to be a Jew and an European at the same time, and he wisely and thoughtfully answered the problem as the Maccabean party did hundreds and hundreds of years ago. The others, the assimilationists, disappeared; the isolationists led a stultified, starved, petrified type of a life.

And we are faced, and you young people are faced, with the same problem in America today. I know that the problem is complicated by what we call anti-Semitism. I know that if we have to choose one of these three solutions without any outer pressure our choice would be a much simpler one; but because we are in the unfavored or disfavored position of a minority, we are subjected to an antipathy or a discrimination which frequently drives many of us to choose the assimilationist solution, even though the mind and the heart counsels otherwise.

The whole matter of anti-Semitism, of Jewish prejudice, comes with particular poignancy and particular bitterness to young people, because they are young and extremely sensitive. They have encountered it in college very often, and they realize that in some of our institutions of learning they are not wanted,--at least not wanted in considerable numbers; and in many a



college club and fraternities and sororities they are not wanted, in spite of their fine scholastic records and their athletic achievements, and being young, they are hurt, cut to the quick, by this unjust, unAmerican discrimination.

They realize, too, that in many instances the Jews find it difficult to procure employment as teachers or professors in our institutions of learning, and that many find it extremely difficult to procure employment in the business world - a subject of which I should like to speak at some other time and in greater detail. Now the subject of anti-Semitism is a very old one, and very little can be said about it. When all is said and done, in the last analysis, it resolves itself, as far as the individual Jew is concerned, to a matter of character and sportsmanship.

If you are willing for the sake of a bit of ease, or a pittance of social advantage or preferment which you may achieve,--if you are willing for the sake of these to surrender your racial heritage, then nothing that can be said to you on this subject will have any influence upon you. If, on the other hand, your character, your instinct, will not permit you to turn your back upon your racial heritage, upon a glorious story of an upward struggle through the ages for right and truth and freedom, then really nothing more need be



said to you. You have solved the problem for yourself.

There were Jews in ancient days who preferred the flesh pots of Egypt to freedom and to man's estate. There are such Jews today, and nothing that we can say will persuade them otherwise. This, however, all of us ought to bear in mind: that whatever a few Jews do in this matter of assimilation, whatever many Jews do, the Jewish people decided long ago what it is going to do.

I read you this morning this proclamation of the old high priest, the father of Judas the Maccabaeus: "Though all the peoples of the earth forsake their God, I, my son, my brethern, will not." And that has been the Jewish answer throughout the ages. To us anti-Semitism is nothing new. It has no new tricks with which to surprise us. In all ages, in every land, we encountered it; and in the past we encountered anti-Semitism in its ugliest and most brutal form,--in murderous inquisition, in yellow badges, in ghettos, in exile, in all kinds of accusations, humiliations, pogroms and massacres. We encountered them all century after century, land after land. No new surprises for us. And we survived because we willed to live. That's the story. We did not want to die. No people perishes unless it has made up its mind that it no longer cares to live.

Our choice today, my young friends, is



not whether we shall live or die, because Israel means to live. Our choice is whether we shall live nobly or ignobly, affirmatively or apologetically, as Jews or as cryptic Jews. That is our choice, and you ought to make that choice for yourselves. The brave Jew chooses the courageous way. He does not beguile himself in this matter of anti-Semitism; he faces it frankly.

The great Albert Einstein was recently honored at Cherbourg for his epoch making contribution and to the science of mathematical physics/ astronomy, and he was asked to say a few words to the notable assembly at which the honorary degree was conferred upon him, and Einstein, whose name will be remembered long after the names of nearly all who lived in this generation will be forgotten, said: "If my theory of relativity is proven true, the German people will say I was a German; the French people will say I was a citizen of the world. If my theory of relativity is proven false, the French people will say I was a German; the German people will say I was a Jew."

Once the Jew faces the fact of anti-Semitism frankly, he has already, in a sense, overleaped it; in a sense, he has solved it, because, don't you see, it cannot longer touch his inner life, his pride, his soul. From that moment he can look upon anti-Semitism as an enemy without; it is no longer a poison within.



The adjustment, young friends, which I would recommend to you, is the self-same adjustment which your ancestors made in Judea, in the lands of the great Arab peoples, in Western Europe: eat the meat of the fruit and cast aside the rind. Take hold of this, but do not let go of this, either. Our way is the way of Americans and the way of Jews. Our way as Americans is clear--absolute loyalty to the best in American life, the highest kind of citizenship. We owe that to America. Whatever benefits America benefits us; whatever hurts America hurts us. But remember that not everything that transpires in American life is ipso facto American. There is much of rudeness and narrowness and vulgarity and harshness in American life; and when you surrender yourself to these you are actually betraying America. Not every voice heard in this land is the voice of America. The mob clamor is certainly not America. Be discriminatory, appraising, selecting of American ideals and standards, and devote yourself to them.

And your way as Jews is clear---the highest type of Jewish manhood and womanhood, exemplified in your own life the ancient ideals of our race: justice, peace, cleanliness, moral purity, moral aspiration. Identify yourselves actively with the Jewish community life here and abroad; acquaint yourselves with the history and the literature of your people, so that you



may know the why and the wherefore of Jewish survival. Link up your life with all the great movements in the Jewish world today which are making for the preservation and the ennoblement of our group life. That is your way as a Jew; the other way your way as an American. And the two are not in conflict; they are not divergent, they are convergent.

There is a simple consonance between the spirit of America and the spirit of the Jew, between the spirit of the oldest revolutionary people who struck out for freedom from the land of the Pharaohs, and one of the youngest revolutionary people. The early Colonial commonwealths were steeped in the lore and the tradition and the spirit of our Hebraic civilization. America will never resent our Jewish loyalty. It will resent and must resent our non-Jewish betrayal; because no one is so dangerous to American life as the man who turns his back upon his people's culture and traditions and enters the arena of American life as a ravenous creature of acquisitiveness, without restraint, without control.

I offer you young friends of mine this solution for your problem--the solution of the Maccabees. The better Jews you will be, the better Americans you will be, the happier you will be. There is a danger that your characters will be broken up, the harmony of your life



destroyed by your desire, your blind desire to cater, to please, to apologize, to deny yourselves. No happiness lies in that direction. Happiness lies in the direction of living free, self-conscious, affirmative, joyous, eager lives,--living what you are: Jews in America, descendants of the Maccabees in America, heirs of a marvelous tradition in America, children of a people that will not die in America or elsewhere.

This is the Chanukah message to the sons of Israel.





sermon 314

AN ABSTRACT OF THE ADDRESS  
"OUR WAY AS AMERICANS AND JEWS" at THE TEMPLE  
BY  
RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER  
Dec. 29th, 1929.

The Festival of lights which Jews throughout the world are celebrating at this season illustrates most vividly one of the oldest problems in Jewish life, that of adjustment to other peoples and other cultures.

At the time of the Maccabees the Jews while still on their land, were no longer an independent people. They had been engulfed in the great Greek empire which Alexander had founded. For nearly two centuries they had been subjected to the cultural influences of Hellenic civilization - the most brilliant civilization known to antiquity. The Jews were religiously and morally superior to the Greeks but culturally inferior. Athens was brilliant and alluring in the refinements of the sophisticated civilization. Judea was inhabited by simple, hardy, plain-living, God-fearing folk to whom the culture of the Greeks came as a sharp relish, an exotic and tantalizing thing. They could not match the philosophers, artists, dramatists, poets, theatres or circuses of Hellas. But they were no barbarians either. They too had a noble civilization fashioned through more than ten centuries by heroes, patriarchs, prophets, priests and sages. They were in possession of the most advanced religion known to mankind and the noblest code of ethics. The two cultures met. How was the Jew to adjust himself to the Greek culture?

Some counselled assimilation, complete submergence in the great Greek melting pot which was being formed around the shores of the Mediterranean. Others counselled isolation.

The Greeks were heathens and idolaters and therefore everything about them was anathema. The men of vision, however, counselled harmonious adjustment. The Jews can learn much from the Greeks. 'Let the Jews eat the meat of the fruit of their culture and cast away the rind.' The Jews have much to teach



The Greek world in religious truth and moral idealism. Let the two civilizations therefore interact but let the Jew resist religious submergence and national annihilation.

The third solution was largely favored, with the result that Judaism was saved, Greek thought penetrated Jewish thought and Jewish religious values penetrated and transformed the Hellenic world. Had this adjustment not taken place ~~the Jewish~~ *Judaism* ~~people~~ would today be only a faint memory and Christianity would not even have been born.

The Jew is facing the same problem of adjustment today. The same solutions - assimilation, isolation and harmonious adjustment are now being offered. And it is likely that the third solution of harmonious adjustment will prevail as far as the people as a whole is concerned. In America the Jew will participate fully in the common life of the American people and will strive for the attainment of the highest type of citizenship. He will <sup>however</sup> not destroy his identity. He will preserve the moral, spiritual and cultural values of his group. He will train his children in enlightened Jewish manhood, ground them in the moral code of his race and teach them loyalty to everything which makes for the preservation and ennoblement of Jewish group life.

Our ways as Americans and Jews are not divergent but convergent. There is no conflict between the spirit of Israel, the oldest revolutionary people that struck out for freedom and America, one of the youngest. The Hebraic influence informed much of the early life of this country. America will never resent our Jewish loyalties. It will and must resent our Jewish disloyalties.



1. I should like to address - Surface meaning - Sermon 314  
- For Chanukkah commemorates - A little people -  
- 4th of July - There is a drama.

2. Our life during last 2000 yrs - shuttle-c.  
Early history - epic in its quality - From Moses -  
Revolutions - Chanukkah - celebrates - Pride -

3. The will to live - So much so - swind stark -  
fortresses - In last century - Self-determ.  
p. 31b.

4. I should like to address myself - illustrate oldest  
problem - adjustment.

① While it is true Jews still live on land  
- rel. superior - culturally superior - Months  
- Athens was brilliant realizing - Judea -  
They were not barbarians - Cultures Met.

② 3 Ans was - cession - Inst. Adjust -  
- when they adjust -

③ The third method

④ Arabic Civilization - West - Eng Ans.

5. Problem complicated - Antisemitism.

① Comes with part. poignancy - Just. Call  
② helped did - Character Spoken  
- Obsh. pots -











to exchange it for any other life. We wanted to remain what we were - Jews. So much so, that when the sword was thrust from our hands - when we were exiled from our land, banished & scattered, we continued to fight for our life & freedom, not with physical arms any longer. For then we could not employ <sup>physical</sup> but with spiritual arms - with our resolutions, stubbornness, and sacrificial loyalty. For everywhere, in whatever land we found ourselves, we built circles and fraternities, not of stone, but of the spirit - synagogues, schools, homes, where the unique free and vigorous Jewish life <sup>Mosaic</sup> continued unabated. - In the last century, when many other oppressed peoples in Europe began to demand their right as free people, and nations awoke to that self-determination, became pol. battle-crisis, Israel, too, set about reconstructing its nat. life and demanding its own land. The movement towards Pol. is but another manifestation of our people's will to live, and of its unbroken <sup>un-ang</sup> ~~un-ang~~ spirit. ~~from time~~ the spirit, the force, motivated the whole of history - and the people are the direct heirs, that monumental life-hungry, ~~the~~ our race —

2. I should like to address myself this afternoon to our young people esp. for get across the message. This festival illustrates most vividly one, the oldest problems of J. life - the problem of adjustment to other peoples & other cultures.

Of which it is known that at times, M-Jews still in their own land, they were no longer an independent people. Engulfed in great empires, Alexander. For 200 yrs. Pol. <sup>had been</sup> under pol. & cultural influence of <sup>that people</sup> ~~the Greeks~~. While rel. & sp. superior to the Greeks - Jew was culturally inferior. Just











① The Man you do not sympathize himself. He faces  
antit. frankly. Evening - but facing it frankly, he  
has already, as a seer, overleapt it. It cannot  
touch his real self - his inner self. It cannot  
so long wound his pride - his self-respect, his  
man-hood. He faces an evening - ~~that's all!~~  
without - not a person within!

4) Our way as Am. is clear. The highest type of citizenship.  
- fullest participation in loyalist manner. The best / best  
every thing that takes place in Am. is stern - cheer-  
ful - vicious - narrow. To succumb to them is to betray  
America. The unb-claim is not the vice of Am.  
again - adjustment - not assimilation - What - not the Road

5) Our way as Jew is clear - The highest type of Jew.  
early liberal Jew manhood, fullest particip. in J. comm.  
life - here and abroad - to exemplify in our private & public life J.  
moral & standards, justice, peace and moral cleanliness.  
intimate knowledge & deeq. with J. life. Trusty - +  
cooperation in all the death - while movement in  
J. which make for the preservation of the movement  
of our people life - up-standing, free, valorous Mass-Jews!

6) Courage There is no conflict  
bet. the oldest revolutionaries, freedom  
and the youngest - ideal. (Jew. is like a ray, the O.T.  
Nehari influence in our Cultural movement wealth.  
Am. will resent our Jewish loyalties. It will resent  
an J. betrayal.